

Bush what kind of president?

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THROUGHOUT a quarter of a century of government experience, in which he served as United States ambassador to the United Nations, American envoy to China, director of central intelligence, and vice-president, George Herbert Walker Bush has been on the receiving end of other people's orders. As president, he must suddenly reverse roles and, in an institutional metamorphosis, take charge and exercise personal and political leadership of the American political system.

What sort of president would he make?

A Bush administration would be noted for its pragmatism and political orthodoxy. There is unlikely to be a "Bush Revolution" or any "New Frontier" to be crossed.

Given Mr. Bush's style and personality, there would be little of the flamboyance and innovation that characterized the Reagan administration. There would be less of John Wayne and more of Jimmy Stewart.

Overall, Bush would seek to balance continuity and change with a minimum of risk.

Personal style

In his acceptance speech at New Orleans, Bush partly erased his public image as an inbred elitist, effectively painting a self-portrait of an independent, confident, and self-deprecating individual. He came out from under the shadow of his presidential benefactor. "I'm a quiet man," he said, "but I hear the quiet people others don't – the ones who raise the family, pay the taxes, meet the mortgage. And I hear them and I am moved, and their concerns are mine."

Accordingly, his would be a personal presidency, with less of the cinematic flourishes and public relations choreography that marked the Reagan years.

Yet, notwithstanding the low expectations Bush invariably inspires, he shows signs he has been emancipated and may be bolder and more imaginative than his past political history portends.

He prides himself on being a good listener, yet, much like Ronald Reagan, he admits he reads very few books. Despite his considerable travels, he would lack the curiosity about world affairs that characterized John Kennedy and Richard Nixon.

Managerial style

Bush would preside over a goal-oriented administration. He claims, "I'm a man who sees life in terms of missions – missions defined and missions completed."

Even his political opponents grant that he has the ability to put together effective organizations and appoint subordinates with quality; Sen. Dan Quayle appears an exception. Presumably, these skills would be transmitted to the White House, though the process used in the Quayle selection will plainly need to be upgraded.

One of the assets of Bush's broad experience in government and business is that he is personally acquainted with numerous people whom he could recruit to serve in his administration. The ethical standards, stressed in his acceptance speech, preclude the overt cronyism so prevalent in the Reagan administration. Of course this is easier said than followed.

As A. James Reichley, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, has observed, "He would be more involved in the detailed, day-to-day business of government than President Reagan, but not as much as Jimmy Carter and Richard Nixon."

Bush has a history of averting political confrontations. This would hinder him in a job that requires making the tough decisions. He has, for example, variously reversed himself on the Equal Rights Amendment, abortion, and tax reform.

Use of the vice-presidency

After eight years as vice-president, Bush is intimately familiar with the advantages and disadvantages of this "understudy" office. Shortly after selecting the Indiana senator as his running mate, Bush pledged that the Oval Office would be as open to his vice-president as it was when he served Mr. Reagan.

Yet Bush thinks the country "can only have one president at a time." In his autobiography, "Looking Forward," he writes, "On the day a disgruntled, self-serving Vice-President declares civil war on the White House by publicly challenging a president, our system of government will be in serious trouble."

Predictably, Senator Quayle's role will be patterned on the reasonably close working relationship established between President Carter and Walter Mondale, which continued more or less with Reagan and Bush. Mr. Quayle might direct issue-related task forces, serve as a troubleshooter, and represent the president on ceremonial occasions. He would have an office in the White House and in all probability have a regularly scheduled weekly meeting with the president.

Because of their age gap, however – Bush is 64 and Quayle, 41 – their relationship would be somewhat that of father and son. Also, Quayle's lack of political stature in Washington and his relatively brief and unimpressive Senate tenure leave uncertain how much weight he could carry in legislative affairs on behalf of the White House. Moreover, former vice-presidents who have become presidents in recent years have not been noted for empowering their vice-presidents (Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon).

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Use of the Cabinet

Bush's Cabinet would comprise moderate, establishment Republicans, generally professionally well qualified for their positions. Its membership would be geographically balanced. He has promised that a Hispanic would be included in his Cabinet. Bush apparently helped Reagan find Lauro Cavazos, who was recently appointed secretary of education. Also, blacks and women would almost certainly be represented.

Loyalty, a trait highly valued by Bush, would be a paramount criterion in his search for people to fill the top layer of leadership in his administration.

He would be particularly careful in his selection of a new attorney general, to avoid any distracting controversy similar to that which swirled around Edwin Meese during the second term of the Reagan administration.

What kind of presidency

Bush would treat Cabinet and sub-Cabinet officials as presidential deputies, thus ensuring their cooperation and support and enhancing his prospects for hearing all sides of an issue. Officials who help develop policy are more likely to be committed to carrying it out.

High on the list of prospective Bush Cabinet appointees are James Baker Jr., former Reagan White House chief of staff and Treasury secretary, now serving as Bush's campaign chairman; former Rep. Jack Kemp; former Transportation Secretary Elizabeth Dole; Frederic V. Malek, former Nixon aide and current Bush campaign strategist, on leave as chief executive of the Marriott Corporation; Frank Carlucci III, current secretary of defense; former National Security Council aide Brent Scowcroft; Pierre (Pete) du Pont, former Delaware governor; and Nicholas Brady, newly named Treasury secretary, who might be reappointed to the post. Former Sen. John Tower might be appointed to a key national security post, and current governors John Sununu of New Hampshire and James Thompson of Illinois might be summoned to Cabinet posts as well.

White House and inner circle

In contrast to Reagan, Bush would attempt to be more of a hands-on chief executive. He would not delegate responsibility nearly as much as his predecessor. He would decentralize authority and rely more on department heads for counsel.

His White House organizational structure would be shaped along traditional lines, with a chief of staff at the top - in all probability Craig Fuller, who served as Bush's principal aide during his vice-presidency.

Administrative boundaries would be clearly defined; there would not be any effort to impose exotic organizational structures, such as Reagan's first-term "troika." Nor would there be as much energy and manpower poured into public relations and elaborate stagecrafting as in the Reagan White House.

Bush would try to avoid the temptation of allowing the White House to take on problems and responsibilities that are recognized as being under the Cabinet's jurisdiction. He is on record now, post Iran-contra, as saying the National Security Council was formed to advise the president, not to take on the job of the Central Intelligence Agency in running covert operations.

Besides Mr. Fuller, other potential White House aides include Lee Atwater, Rich Bond, Pete Teeley, pollster Robert Teeter, Stanford economist Michael J. Boskin, Harvard economist Martin Feldstein, domestic policy adviser Deborah Steelman, and current NSC assistant Colin Powell Jr. CIA director William Webster would be kept on. Richard Darman would be a top prospect to head the Office of Management and Budget.

As a former member of Congress (1967-71), vice-president, and government executive, Bush knows the legislative process and is personally acquainted with many legislators. That gives him an edge - even more than Reagan when he assumed the presidency, and certainly more than the "outsider" Carter.

On the other hand, Bush's role in the Iran-contra affair and in other undeclared foreign policy activities in the Reagan years would make many members of Congress skeptical until Bush proved his willingness to abide by the Constitution and the War Powers Resolution.

By nature, Bush is a compromiser and conciliator - characteristics that should serve him well in dealing with Congress. One of his senior aides observes, "He has a collegial personality; he likes to relate to other people. He prefers consensus, rather than bull his way through."

He would first, however, have to fashion a legislative agenda distinctly his own. How tough a bargainer would he be? Could he inspire public support for his programs? How would he cope with a Congress with a Democratic majority in both houses?

Relations with the news media

Given his bland personality and moderate conservatism - as well as lack of communications flair - Bush is unlikely to become the media's darling. He is clearly aware of the role and impact of the press and although he gets along fairly well with reporters, he keeps them at arm's length.

Above all, he suffers from the predictable comparison with Reagan, who excelled at the art of presidential imagemaking.

Whereas Reagan was able to buffer media criticism with his personal magnetism, Bush enjoys no such luxury. His relationship with the media has been tempered by several incidents, most recently his counteroffensive for their coverage of Quayle's lack of qualifications.

Bush would hold more press conferences than Reagan, yet chances are that his relationship with the press would follow a traditional cycle: a brief "honeymoon" followed by a period of mutual tolerance, eventually slipping into a long stretch of cool adversarinesship.

Foreign affairs and defense policy

Bush would follow a hard-line policy of peace through strength, to which he adds the cautionary caveat, "with our eyes wide open."

He has increasingly stressed the need of renewing the "American Century" by revitalizing the nation's role as world leader, peacemaker, and apostle of prosperity, while at the same time building up its defense forces.

While acknowledging improved relations with the Soviet Union in a foreign policy address early in August, Bush pointedly subscribes to the famous statement made by John F. Kennedy: "Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we will bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty." Bush would pursue further good ties with Mikhail Gorbachev.

Bush maintains that the Grenada assault "was the right thing to do... a proud moment for America." He wouldn't "hesitate to support freedom and rescue American lives when they're in danger."

Similarly, he favors US assistance to "freedom fighters" in Nicaragua, Angola, Afghanistan, and other world trouble spots. He, like Reagan, would have difficulty with the Democratic Congress on several of these matters.

He promises to continue Reagan's programs for "star wars," the MX missile, B-1 bomber, and Midgetman. On arms control, he has indicated he will push for a strategic arms reduction treaty with the Soviets.

How the nation will bear the costs has yet to be explained. Bush plainly would also have to provide more than just a token revision of the Pentagon procurement process - again one of the embarrassing episodes of the Reagan record, and one he talks little about in 1988.

Domestic and economic policy

Bush maintains that he favors competence *with* ideology. The problem is that his ideology is not easily defined. Nevertheless, he has been adamant in his pledge never to raise taxes and has stated he will call a domestic "summit" to deal with the deficit crisis.

He has gone on record as promising to create 30 million new jobs in eight years - a proposal that even his favorite economic advisers question. He has also proposed tax credits for child care.

He has renewed endorsement of the social agenda of the political right, including voluntary school prayer, opposition to abortion and gun control, and support for capital punishment. And he has wrapped himself in pledge-to-the-flag Americanism.

Bush would not be a leader in environmental matters. He talks about clean air and water, yet he is mostly known for weakening federal regulations across the board. Earlier this year at a Republican dinner he extolled the benefits of the Alaskan oil pipeline with this comment: "The caribou love it. They rub up against it and they have babies. And there are more caribou in Alaska than you can shake a stick at." A Teddy Roosevelt he is unlikely to be.

Bush favors a "college savings bond" that would allow parents to ensure their children's higher education, and the line-item veto. He has promised not to tamper with social security. He acknowledges that the growing number of homeless need help but has not said how he would help them.

He seldom talks about the federal budget and US trade deficits - two failures of the Reagan years.

Bush's emphasis on specific objectives is reminiscent of James Polk's presidency: Mr. Polk promised he would achieve four or five specific objectives, and he did, all in one term. A Bush presidency also might be a throwback to the traditional Republicanism of the Eisenhower years, moderate in tone, moderate in achievements, with an emphasis on peace and prosperity.

At the personal level, Bush has to show he relates to the ordinary American citizen, that he understands and is sensitive to their problems, and that he is an uncommon man with a common touch. The presidency would, as it always has for others, bring out and amplify both his strengths and weaknesses.

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